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U.S. SENATOR

PETE WILSON

REPORTS TO CALIFORNIANS

"THE EL SALVADOR ELECTIONS"

In America, we take for granted our right to vote. Not so in El Salvador, where I recently witnessed that country's latest exercise in democracy. Their nation is plagued by poverty and war, yet the Salvadorans are advancing their fledgling democracy amid the chaos, voting in their first free and open presidential election.

As a member of the U.S. observation team appointed by President Reagan for the March 25th Salvadoran elections, I watched and questioned the voters, and I was encouraged by what I saw and heard.

I spoke with many voters, and I came away impressed by the Salvadoran people's hunger for democracy. Some dodged guerilla gunfire to get to the polls, and many (including our observation team) endured the power blackouts caused by guerilla attacks. Voters stood in lines for hours in the midday heat to cast ballots, because the government's best-laid plans to thwart electoral fraud went awry. Some voters had to traipse from one polling place to another in search of a voter list with their names.

Yet 70 percent of the Salvadorans voted, in spite of the intimidation and the confusion. The U.S. observers were unanimous in our reaction to the election, and I felt Rep. Jim Wright (D-Tex.), the House Majority Leader, summed it up for the rest of us when he pledged to do "whatever is necessary to provide the means for the people of El Salvador to preserve a democratic society."

There is indeed bipartisan support for continued U.S. aid to El Salvador, but some critics have cynically charged that the turnout in the presidential election wasn't indicative of the Salvadorans' commitment to democracy. They say that voting is mandatory, and that fear of a fine -- or even worse, of military reprisal -- for not voting prompted the high turnout.

None of us on the observation team saw any evidence that bears out such charges. To allege that the possibility of an incidental fine would compel Salvadorans to brave guerilla attacks to get to the polls is downright insulting to a proud people. As to the charge that fear of the military caused people to cast their ballots, the soldiers had collectively decided to refrain from voting so that they could better guard the polling places. The reasons the soldiers gave us for giving up their right to vote were that they believe in democracy and an apolitical military.

This is not to gloss over the very real presence in the past of "death squads" linked to the military. We know they existed and may yet exist, but those of us observing the election found a military attitude overwhelmingly in support of an open and free democratic process.

We can't compare El Salvador's democratic experience of two short years since the first elections for the constituent assembly were held in March of 1982, to our nation's 208 years of democracy. We are a rich nation, the borders of which have not been invaded since the War of 1812. El Salvador is poverty-stricken and tired of war, yet the free spirit of its people remains indomitable. America should continue its support of the Salvadoran attempt at democracy.

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